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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the current socioeconomic characteristics of Hispanics in the United States, and suggests factors of particular significance in projecting future Hispanic demographics and their implications for the Hispanic community and the broader American population. Hispanics are the second largest minority group and more than half of all mainland Hispanics live in California and Texas. A major reason for the current and projected rapid growth of the Hispanic population is their youth. Hispanics are the youngest major subgroup--in 1984, the median number of school years completed by Hispanics 25 and over was 11.3. Further, Hispanics continue to have higher dropout rates than all other groups. Income statistics indicate that Hispanic families earn substantially less than white families, and the gap is not narrowing. A major cause of low income is occupation: Hispanics tend to hold lower-paid, lower-skilled jobs than whites. One significant consequence of this is that Hispanics are more than twice as likely as white Americans to be poor. Poverty levels are especially high among female-headed households, among Hispanics with low educational levels, and among farm dwellers. Hispanic home ownership rates remain well below the rate for non-Hispanics. Finally, Hispanic voter participation has traditionally been below that of whites. (KH)

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HISPANIC DEMOGRAPHICS: LOOKING AHEAD

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HISPANIC DEMOGRAPHICS: LOOKING AHEAD*

INTRODUCTION

This summary provides an overview of the current socio-economic characteristics of Hispanics in the United States, and also suggests factors of particular significance in projecting future Hispanic demographics and their implications for the Hispanic community and the broader American population.

POPULATION SIZE AND LOCATION

Hispanics are the second largest minority group and one of the fastest growing U.S. subpopulations. The Hispanic population of the mainland United States in 1985 was about 16.9 million, according to Census data. Between 1980 and 1985, the Hispanic population as counted by the Census grew by 16%, as compared to a 3.3% increase for the overall population.** Hispanics constitute at least 7.2% of the mainland U.S. population, and are a heterogeneous group; in 1985, 61% of mainland Hispanics identified themselves as of Mexican origin, 15% Puerto Rican, 10% Central and South American, 6% Cuban, and 8% other. Hispanics are expected to constitute between 8.6% and 9.9% of the U.S. population by the year 2000.

Although Hispanics live in every part of the country, more than half of all mainland Hispanics live in California and Texas, and more than four-fifths live in these two states plus New York, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado. Hispanics are far more likely to live in metropolitan areas than are non-Hispanics; 87% of Hispanics and 74% of non-Hispanics reside within metropolitan areas, and 60% live in metro areas with populations of more than one million. Mexican Americans are least urbanized; 85% of Mexican Americans as compared with 97% of Puerto Ricans and Cubans live within metro areas. Hispanics are becoming increasingly dispersed geographically, and Hispanic populations in a given location are increasingly heterogeneous.

About three-fourths of Mexican Americans, but only one-fourth of Cubans and probably less than one-third of Central and South Americans, are native-born. Puerto Ricans are, of course, citizens by birth. Hispanics accounted for about 40% of legal immigration during the 1970s, and rates have been similar during the first half of the 1980s.

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* Most data used in this summary were obtained from official reports of the Bureau of the Census and other federal agencies; the newest data source was "Persons of Spanish Origin in the United States: March 1985 (Advance Report)," Series P-20, No. 403, Bureau of the Census, December 1985. More detailed information is available in other Council statistical reports on education, employment, and political empowerment.

** The "non-Hispanics" category includes all persons who do not identify themselves as being of Hispanic origin. Thus it includes Whites, Blacks, and other minorities. Hispanic origin is considered ethnicity by the Census Bureau; Hispanics may be of any race.

AGE AND FAMILY STATUS

A major reason for the current and projected rapid growth of the Hispanic population is their youth. Hispanics are the youngest major U.S. subgroup, with a median age of 25.0, compared 26.3 for Blacks and 32.2 for Whites. More than one-third (36%) of Hispanics are less than 18 years old, compared to about one-quarter (26%) of non-Hispanics. Median age varies considerably by subgroup; Mexican Americans have a median age of 23.3, Puerto Ricans 24.3, Central and South Americans 27.1, and Cubans 39.1.

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26.3 B
32.2 W

While Hispanic family size has declined slightly since 1970, the average is 3.9 persons, as compared to 3.2 for non-Hispanic families. Hispanic fertility rates are declining, but remain somewhat higher than those for White or Black women. In 1984, the fertility rates for women 18-44 years old were 64.6 births per 1,000 women for Whites, 72.2 for Blacks, and 86.1 for Hispanics. High fertility rates, combined with a high proportion of persons in peak child-bearing years, assures a growing Hispanic population in the future, even without projected high rates of continuing Hispanic immigration.

As with other population groups, the percentage of Hispanic families headed by women has increased in recent years. In 1985, 23% of Hispanic households were headed by women, compared to 16% of total U.S. households. The percentage varied substantially by subgroup; 44% of Puerto Rican, 22% of Central and South American, 19% of Mexican American, and 16% of Cuban households were headed by women.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Hispanics remain the least educated major U.S. subgroup. In 1984, the median number of school years completed by Hispanics 25 and over was 11.3 years -- less than high school graduation -- compared to 12.2 for Blacks and 12.6 for Whites. Just 8.2% of Hispanics 25 and older had completed four years of college or more, compared to 10.4% of Blacks and 19.8% of Whites. More than one-quarter of Hispanics (29.8%) had completed less than eight years of school, compared to 15.7% of Blacks and just 6.7% of Whites.

Hispanics continue to have higher dropout rates than other groups; about half of Mexican American and Puerto Rican youth leave school without a high school diploma. Hispanics also tend to leave school earlier than other groups; one national study reported that 40% of Hispanic dropouts left school before the spring semester of their sophomore year. This contributes to a high rate of Hispanic functional illiteracy; while rates vary depending upon the measures used, it appears that about half of Hispanic adults lack full English literacy skills.

A lack of adequate language services contributes to low educational attainment among Hispanics. The large majority of adult Hispanics are bilingual; only about one-fourth of native Spanish speakers indicate that they do not speak English. However, nearly two-thirds of limited-English proficient Hispanic children receive no special educational services, and most public and private adult literacy programs serve only persons who are fluent in English.

Hispanic educational attainment has improved somewhat in recent years, yet Hispanics are falling farther behind other groups. For example, the increase between 1980 and 1985 in the percentage of the 25-and-over population

who were college graduates was just 7.9% for Hispanics, compared to a 15.8% increase for Blacks and a 23.8% increase for Whites. Similarly, during the past decade, postsecondary enrollment has been increasing in absolute numbers, but decreasing as a percent of Hispanic high school graduates. In 1975, 35.4% of Hispanics who earned high school diplomas went on to college, but the rate was only 29.9% in 1980. Because of the close relationship between education and employment, these educational deficiencies are likely to have serious consequences in future years.

INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT

Income statistics indicate that Hispanic families earn substantially less than White families, and the gap is not narrowing. In 1984, the median family income for the U.S. population was $26,433; for Whites, it was $27,686, for Hispanics, $18,833, and for Blacks, $15,432. Thus Hispanic family income was about two-thirds (68%) that of Whites.

Hispanic median family earnings tend to be higher than the earnings of Black families, but often this is because more family members work. Hispanics tend to earn less per week than any other group. For the first quarter of 1986, median weekly earnings for employed Whites were $366, for Blacks $288, and for Hispanics $269. Employed Hispanic women earn the lowest wages; during the same period, they earned just $229 per week, compared to $263 for Black women and $290 for White women.

During the past decade, Hispanic unemployment has averaged about 60% higher than the rate for Whites, regardless of changes in the economy. During 1985, the unemployment rate for Whites was 6.2%, while the rate for Hispanics was 10.5% -- 69% higher. The Black unemployment rate was 15.1%; it typically remains more than twice the White rate.

Hispanic men have the highest labor force participation rate of any major group -- 80.4% in 1985, versus 77.0% for White men and 70.8% for Black men -- but Hispanic women are still somewhat less likely than other women to be in the labor force. Their labor force participation rate was just 49.4% in 1985, compared to 54.1% for White women and 56.5% for Black women. An increasing percentage of Hispanic women are joining the work force, however. Hispanics currently make up about 6.7% of the labor force; this is expected to increase to 8-10% by 1995.

A major cause of low income is, of course, occupation. Hispanics tend to hold lower-paid, lower-skilled jobs than Whites; this is particularly true for Hispanic women. Hispanics are only about half as likely as non-Hispanics to hold managerial or professional jobs, but they are far more likely to work as operatives; 30% of Hispanic men and 18% of Hispanic women hold operative jobs, compared to 20% of non-Hispanic men and just 9% of non-Hispanic women. Changes in occupational status are occurring, but slowly, and low educational attainment continues to limit Hispanic occupational opportunity and mobility.

POVERTY

Hispanics are more than twice as likely as White Americans to be poor, and economic slowdowns appear to have a greater negative impact on Hispanics and Blacks than on Whites. In 1984, 11.5% of White individuals, 33.8% of

Blacks, and 28.4% of Hispanics lived below the federal poverty level. According to the 1985 Current Population Survey, Hispanics constituted 7.2% of the U.S. population, but accounted for 12% of the persons in poverty.

Poverty levels are especially high among female-headed households, with Hispanic and Black families having similar poverty rates. In 1983, 56.5% of Hispanic households headed by women had incomes below the poverty level, as compared with 57.2% of Black female-headed households and 28.4% of White female-headed households. Poverty rates are also extremely high among Hispanic children; 37.8% of Hispanic children under 18 were poor in 1983, as compared with 46.3% of Black children and 16.9% of White children. Not surprisingly, children in female-headed families are especially likely to be poor; 70.6% of Hispanic children in such families were poor in 1983, as compared with 68.5% of Black children and 46.9% of White children in households headed by women.

Poverty rates also vary by region and subgroup. More than one-third (37%) of Hispanics in the Northeast lived below the poverty level in 1984, compared to about one-fourth of Hispanics in the Midwest, and a little over one-fifth of Hispanics in the Sunbelt states of the South and West. Puerto Ricans -- who are especially likely to live in the Northeast -- have the highest poverty rate among Hispanic subgroups; 41.9% of Puerto Rican families were poor in 1984, compared to 24.1% of Mexican American, 23.6% of Central and South American, and 12.9% of Cuban families.

Poverty rates are highest among Hispanics with low educational levels. Of Hispanic families whose householder had less than an eighth grade education, 34.6% were poor in 1984, compared to just 10.1% of families whose householder attended at least one year of college.

Poverty levels also vary with occupation. Of Hispanics who worked at some point during 1983, 44.7% of those employed in farming, forestry, and fishing were poor, compared with 26.6% of service workers (including household workers); 11.9% of craft workers; 10.5% of technical, clerical and sales workers; and 6.8% of managerial and professional workers.

Poverty rates are highest for Hispanic farm dwellers; 42.4% of Hispanics living on farms were poor in 1983, as compared with 31.9% of Hispanics living in central cities of metropolitan areas, 22.1% of those living elsewhere in metro areas, and 32.1% of all non-metro Hispanics.

Large families are especially likely to be poor; in 1984, 41.7% of Hispanic families including seven or more persons were low-income, compared to 23.7% of families with just three or four persons.

The continuing high level of poverty among Hispanics, especially among female-headed families and Hispanic children, raises serious concerns about a continuing cycle of poverty in future decades.

HOME OWNERSHIP

Hispanic home ownership rates remain well below the rates for non-Hispanics, and have not improved during the last decade. In 1984, 41.1% of Hispanics lived in homes they owned, as compared with 45.5% of Blacks and

67.3% of Whites. The Hispanic home ownership rate decreased from 43.4% in 1980. Home ownership rates are highest for Mexican Americans and Cubans, and lowest for mainland Puerto Ricans.

VOTER PARTICIPATION

Hispanic voter participation has traditionally been below that of Whites; about 48% of eligible Hispanics voted in the 1984 elections, compared to 58% of eligible Blacks and 64% of eligible Anglos (White non-Hispanics). However, according to Census information analyzed by NALEO (the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials), between 1980 and 1984, Hispanic voter turnout increased 26%, from just under 2.5 million to nearly 3.1 million. Percent increases in Hispanic voter turnout in 1984 were especially significant in four states: New York - 82%; California - 41%; Florida - 27%, and Texas - 25%. Registration increases have been greatest where well organized voter registration campaigns have taken place. The nonpartisan National Hispanic Voter Registration Campaign, spearheaded by the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP), helped register more than 600,000 new Hispanic voters in 1984 alone.

One factor limiting Hispanic voter participation is that only about two-thirds of Hispanic adults are U.S. citizens; naturalization rates are considerably lower for Hispanics than for other documented immigrants. The percentage of Hispanic non-citizens varies greatly by state, from a low of 4.6% in New Mexico to 37.6% in Illinois, 37.9% in California, and 42.8% in Florida.

Low voter participation contributes to underrepresentation of Hispanics as elected officials. In 1984, there were at least 3,100 Hispanic elected officials, over 40% of them in Texas. These included ten voting members of Congress from four states, about 120 state legislators in 19 states, and one Hispanic governor in New Mexico. The number of elected officials has doubled in the past decade, but remains far below what would be expected given the size of the Hispanic population.

Hispanic political involvement is likely to continue to grow, but full participation will require effective naturalization efforts and increased voter registration, as well as political education and outreach by both major political parties and nonpartisan groups.

CONCLUSIONS

Hispanics are a young and growing population and an increasing segment of the nation's work force. This guarantees Hispanics a growing role in the United States of the future, and makes the educational and employment preparation of Hispanics an issue of concern to all Americans. High rates of adult illiteracy, continuing high dropout rates, and pervasive poverty among Hispanic children all suggest a need for the nation to increase its human capital investment in Hispanics as a matter of enlightened self-interest.